

Seasons Tracts

2d.

No. 13

ALL SAINTS DAY

by

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THE CATHEDRAL OF ST. JOHN THE DIVINE
CATHEDRAL HEIGHTS
NEW YORK 25, N. Y.

Published by

The Church Literature Association
238 Abbey House, Victoria Street
London S.W.1.

First Published 1946

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
BY R. H. JOHNS LIMITED
NEWPORT, MON.

ALL SAINTS DAY

The Saints of God

THE Feast of All Saints was instituted in order that the members of the Church militant here on earth might honour the memory of the members of the Church triumphant in heaven. Even in merely human societies it is common to honour the memory of distinguished members who have been "the lights of the world in their several generations," and it is at least as natural to find that God's Church on earth should honour those who have been its heroes, and who are still part of the whole Body of Christ of which the Church here below is only a part. For this reason we have in the course of the year a great number of Saints' days, most of them being the dates of their death to this world, and their entry into the glory of heaven. On All Saints Day, the Church keeps a general observance in honour of all the Blessed, whether they are also remembered on special days or not, and indeed even if their sanctity was not known on earth and their names are now no longer remembered.

The glory of the Saints is part of the glory of Christ in his mystical Body the Church. The friends of God have been of all classes of society and of all ages, differing in every kind of outward circumstance and in the talents and graces that have adorned their lives, but one in their love of God and in their zeal for his service. They have included the rich and the poor, the learned and the simple, men and women, young and old, priests and layfolk. In enrolling their names in its calendars, the Church has distinguished various groups : the Mother of God, who is the Queen of All Saints ; the Apostles and Evangelists ; the Martyrs, who gave their lives for the sake of Christ ; the Confessors,

who have served him by consecrated lives, but from whom the final witness of martyrdom was not demanded; the Virgin Saints, whose purity was an offering to Christ as their Spouse; the Doctors, the great teachers of the Christian faith to the world. In their varying degrees, and in the different circumstances of their lives, all these have shown something of the beauty of Christ to men, as the white light of his radiance has been refracted into varied colours through the prismatic glass of the Church's life.

All Saints Day

The observance of All Saints Day provides the devout Christian with a special occasion for thinking of this great company of the Blessed. On it, he first of all pays honour to God whose grace has raised so many to sanctity, and honours the servants of God who are now with their Lord in heaven. In doing so, he gives God thanks for the graces he gave his Saints in their earthly lives, and the glory he now gives them in heaven. More than this, since paying honour to the Saints would not be sincere unless the Christian meant to follow their example, he considers their holy lives in order that he may imitate them, and remembers that as they were of the same human nature as he is, so also God offers him the same graces that brought them to holiness. As the Church is one family, whose unity transcends the barrier of death, he also asks for the prayers of the Saints. "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (St James v. 16); and it would be strange if the Christian on earth did not desire the effectual prayers of the righteous servants of God who have come to their reward. We need not fear that God will not allow them to know of our needs; the Saints are with God, and as we know that "there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth" (St Luke xv. 10), so can we also be assured that the Saints who are in heaven, where we shall be

“equal unto the angels” (St Luke xx. 36) have also sufficient knowledge of our needs to pray for us.

To these purposes of the feast we may add one more : that as there has been a countless host of Saints “which have no memorial” (Ecclus. xliv. 9) on earth, we may glorify God for them on this day, as we glorify him for those whom we still remember on their proper days.

The first institution of this feast is now difficult to discover. The earliest Saints’ days to be observed were the death-days of the Martyrs, and there is an early reference to a feast, apparently on May 13, in honour of “the martyrs of all the earth.” In the seventh century the heathen Pantheon in Rome was dedicated on May 13 as a Christian church in honour of Our Lady and All Martyrs, and the day of its dedication may have been fixed to coincide with a feast on this day. In the year 804, there is a reference in an Irish manuscript to the “hosts multitudinous that ennoble stormy All Saints Day,” and it may be from these islands that the choice of November 1 for the feast spread to the continent to displace the earlier day. In the ninth century the day that we now observe was well established in the west, while in the east the corresponding festival is still observed, as it has been there from very early days, on the day that we know as Trinity Sunday.

The Services of the Feast

The Mass for All Saints Day is one of singular beauty. In the opening chant of the *Introit* we start with the invitation “Rejoice we all in the Lord, keeping feast day in honour of all the Saints” ; and in the Psalm verse to which this is the antiphon we call on the Saints themselves to rejoice with us : “Rejoice in the Lord, O ye righteous : for it becometh well the just to be thankful.” So throughout the Mass the praise of earth and the praise of heaven intermingle, in honour of the King of All Saints.

In the *Collect* we have a short devotional commentary on the words of the Creed "the Communion of Saints." In it we pray to God, who has knit together his elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical Body of his Son. The whole Church is one Body, the mystical Body of Christ, and in it we all share together in one life ; this is, incidentally the justification of our asking for the prayers of the members of the Body whom we no longer see. Then we pray that we may follow God's Saints in all virtuous and godly living on earth, and so may come to those unspeakable joys that they have now, and to which we look forward in heaven.

The *Lesson* (in place of the usual reading of one of the Epistles) is from the Revelation (vii. 2 ff). It gives us the vision that St John had of the Saints in heaven. First of all, thinking in terms of his own race, he speaks of the ideal Israel of God. With his usual symbolism of numbers, he represents this Israel by the twelve tribes, and each tribe by twelve thousand, to signify the perfection of that number (actually only known to God) of the children of Israel to be sealed as "servants of our God." So with deliberate and majestic repetition he reads as it were the roll-call of Israel : "of the tribe of Juda were sealed twelve thousand ; of the tribe of Reuben were sealed twelve thousand " ; and so through the names of all the tribes. Then he turns his thought to the Saints from all the nations of the earth. Now, as is his custom, he represents the whole world by the number four, the number of the cardinal points of the compass, so that he speaks of the nations of the world by four titles : "all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues." Even in those early days, when Christians were yet so few, he sees them prophetically as "a great multitude which no man could number"—as against the definite (though of course unknown) number of the children of Israel that could be imagined. Then, in the vision, all the redeemed together sing praise to

God : " Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb."

After the Lesson, we turn in the *Gradual* (the chant between the Epistle and Gospel) to the thought of the dependence of the Saints on God. " O fear the Lord, all ye Saints of his : for they that fear him lack nothing " are the words of Psalm 34, and are balanced by the words of our Lord himself : " Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden : and I will refresh you."

The *Gospel* for the feast (St Matthew v. 1 ff) is from the sermon on the mount, and consists of the beatitudes, in which our Lord draws a contrast between the things on which worldly men set their hearts and the true blessedness of the Saints. As we hear each of these beatitudes uttered, we can think of great Saints of God to whom they specially apply : the poor in spirit, like St Francis, who have forsaken the wealth of earth for that of heaven ; the meek, like our English St Edward, to whom the heavenly crown was greater than the earthly ; those who hungered and thirsted after righteousness, like St Thomas of Canterbury ; the merciful, like St Stepehn who prayed for his murderers ; the pure in heart, like the holy Virgins ; the peacemakers, like St Barnabas ; those who were persecuted, such as the holy Martyrs ; all of whom have received their reward in heaven, and know the true blessedness.

The thought of the Martyrs is again put before us in the *Offertory-verse* : " The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and there shall no torment touch them " ; while in the *Communion-verse* we return to the thought of the Gospel : " Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

The feast of All Saints is one of those distinguished by having an *Octave*, so that the observance is continued for a week, instead of ending on the actual day.

Devotion to the Saints

Devotion to the Saints is an outstanding characteristic of Catholic life. Our holy religion is not an individual and solitary culture of the soul, unrelated to the lives of our brethren. It is a life in a family, one that extends beyond the borders of this world, and embraces the souls of the departed, and the Saints in heaven. To think often of the Saints is not to think less of their Lord, but to realise something of his power as it is shown in the lives of his servants, and to learn something of the true meaning of fellowship in the Church. Those who strive today to fight the battle of Christ should not be unmindful of the "great cloud of witnesses" with whose encouragement and by the aid of whose prayers we shall the more easily "run with patience the race that is set before us" (Hebrews xii. 1). They whom we honour on All Saints Day are our brethren in heaven, by the aid of whose prayers may God bring us to the like rewards.

Daily in our private devotions we should ask for the prayers of God's Saints, and above all those of the Mother of our Saviour, and our Patron Saints.

Saint Mary, Mother of God our Saviour Jesus Christ, pray for us.

All holy angels and archangels, and all holy orders of blessed spirits, pray for us.

All holy patriarchs and prophets, apostles, martyrs, confessors and virgins, and all the blessed company of heaven, pray for us.

(From the first English Litany).